

Senate Statistics

Sergeants at Arms

Daniel M. Ransdell (1900-1912)



One hundred years ago, the Senate selected a new sergeant at arms for the new century. Daniel Moore Ransdell took his oath of office on February 1, 1900, as the fourteenth person to hold that post. Born fifty-seven years earlier, on June 15, 1842, Ransdell grew up on a farm near Indianapolis, Indiana, the son of a Baptist preacher. In his teen years, he taught in local schools while pursuing his studies at Franklin College. The outbreak of the Civil War, however, swiftly ended his college career. Over the bitter protests of his father, a staunch Democrat who opposed the [Abraham Lincoln](#) administration's prosecution of the conflict, he enlisted as a non-commissioned officer in the Seventieth Indiana Regiment, commanded by Colonel [Benjamin Harrison](#). On May 15, 1864, while advancing with Union troops on Atlanta, Georgia, he suffered the loss of his right arm in an engagement that produced more than ten thousand Union and Confederate casualties. Ransdell vividly described the scene at the Battle of Resaca. "When the Minnie ball struck me, shattering my right hand and arm, I experienced what every soldier has at some time felt. While we were engaged, I knew no fear, but the moment I was disarmed, the great danger overpowered me. It would be impossible to describe the awful feelings of the next half hour and until I got under some cover. Friends falling on all sides, the death shrieks of my schoolmates resounding in the air, blood and carnage everywhere. We lost one-half the company to which I belonged."

After the war, Ransdell enrolled in a commercial college and taught school for a year. He then entered the political arena, as a protege of Benjamin Harrison, and won election and appointment to key positions in the Indianapolis city government. Ransdell's influence in state and regional Republican politics—he became known as one of his party's "slick six"—helped solidify support for Harrison to receive the 1888 Republican presidential nomination. By carefully getting delegates from other states to commit to Harrison as their second choice, he helped engineer his old leader's selection—on the eighth ballot—when the party's frontrunners failed to gain the necessary majority. In those days before contenders actually attended party conventions, Ransdell claimed the honor of delivering the news to Harrison. (He was also best man at Harrison's second wedding and, in 1901, Sergeant at Arms Ransdell was with the former president when he died.)

In modern terms, Benjamin Harrison might be described as a "cold fish." His formal and legalistic manner tended to alienate his natural supporters, but Ransdell seemed to be able to "draw out the best" in the president. One reporter sensed a "perfect understanding and sympathy between these men. Ransdell seemed to supply a lack in Harrison, who came early to recognize the dependable qualities that his friend possessed and had him with him as much as possible."

When Benjamin Harrison entered the White House in 1889, he rewarded Ransdell's loyalty by appointing him marshal of the District of Columbia Supreme Court. With an office just a few blocks from the White House, Ransdell was readily available to join the president for business and social occasions. He remained at that post until Harrison's Democratic successor, Grover Cleveland, made his own appointment in 1894. When Cleveland won the presidency in 1893, his party also took control of the Senate and removed its Republican sergeant at arms and secretary. Although the Republicans regained the Senate majority two years later, they left the two Democratic officers in place because deep divisions within their own party kept them from agreeing on suitable successors. By 1900, however, those divisions had healed and the party moved to choose competent Republicans for both key posts. At that time, Benjamin Harrison was the only living former Republican President. His recommendation of Ransdell to be sergeant at arms, combined with Ransdell's pleasing personality and rich fund of political knowledge, caused the Republican Caucus to elect him on January 29, 1900, with only token opposition.

The Washington Evening Star of February 1, 1900, carried an account of Ransdell's selection and included the following note intended to discourage job-seekers from pestering either him or the Senate's secretary. "They have nothing to do with the question of appointments, which is solely in the hands of the Republican caucus committee. The caucus has appointed a [patronage] committee, of which Senator McMillan is the chairman, and this committee will arrange for the distribution of places in which changes are made. This process will be very similar to that adopted by the Democrats when they were in control in 1893 and will involve changes in about seventy-five places. These changes will be made gradually."

Ransdell was a most popular sergeant at arms. His intelligent and friendly nature encouraged senators to seek his assistance, regardless of whether he was the responsible official. As one journalist observed, "there is nothing under the sun a Senator wants that he does not go to the Sergeant at Arms for, from a new ink bottle to advice concerning a pending measure. No matter what question comes up, the cry is 'Ask Ransdell about it.' He finds a way out of the most intricate labyrinths; he smooths down disgruntled visitors, and he gets rid of undesirable ones in a way that makes them feel they are being treated with great consideration."

Years later, many remembered his effectiveness in handling congressional arrangements for the inaugurations of Republican Presidents [Theodore Roosevelt](#) and William Howard Taft. A severe snow storm complicated his duties for Taft's 1909 swearing-in, with a last-

minute decision to conduct the oath-taking in the Senate chamber for the only time in that room's history.

Sergeant at Arms Ransdell also enjoyed his responsibilities for appointing Senate pages. One writer described his special interest in selecting sons (the first female page was not appointed until 1971) of widowed mothers, or boys who assisted a dependent family member. "His last selection [in 1912] was made because the grandmother of the boy was blind and he was helping to cheer her sightless declining years." According to the reporter, that appointment was Ransdell's last official act, as he made it from his deathbed.

Daniel Ransdell died at the age of seventy, on November 28, 1912.